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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fighters' motivations for joining extremist groups: Investigating the attractiveness of the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps

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Abstract
In 2014, eight years prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian-backed separatists seized parts of the Ukrainian regions Luhansk and Donetsk. Shortly thereafter, thousands of Ukrainians voluntarily enrolled to various paramilitary battalions. Unlike the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps (RS VUC), almost all battalions were incorporated into Ukrainian official defence structures. Applying uncertainty-identity theory and based on interviews, observations, and documents, this study investigates the attractiveness of RS VUC prior to the 2022 war, motivating the fighters to join this organisation and to remain in it. The study found that fighters of RS VUC distrusted society, the wider population, and state authorities. RS VUC, with its high fighting morale, discipline, family-like relationships between fighters, as well as its clear ideology and boundaries between 'us' and 'them', were attractive to the fighters since its unambiguous group prototypes and high entitativity, reduced the fighters' self-uncertainty regarding their social identity in an uncertain environment. The findings also revealed that the fighters' choice to join RS VUC can be understood as a rational decision, since RS VUC's group entitativity provided the fighters with moral and emotional benefits, as well as maximised their chances of survival.

Keywords: Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps; Motivations; Attractiveness; Self-Uncertainty; Extremism; Ukraine

Introduction

In April 2014, eight years prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, an armed conflict in Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, broke out between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government. The conflict was probably due to discontent over the outcome of the Maidan Revolution (or *coup d'état*), the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and Russian support of separatists in Donbas.[1] The ill-organised and poorly equipped Ukrainian army initially made an ineffective resistance. In the beginning, volunteers in various paramilitary groups accounted for most of the fighting. Over time, most volunteer paramilitary groups were incorporated into the official security structures under Ukrainian state control, and act under the official command of either the Ministry of Defense (MoD) or the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA).[2] However, the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps (RS VUC) is an exception; it still operates independently.[3]

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[1] Tetyana Malyarenko and David J. Galbreath, 'Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine: Beyond integration and abolition', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16:1 (2016), p. 113.

[2] Rosaria Puglisi, *Heroes or Villains? Volunteer Battalions in post-Maidan Ukraine* (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2015, No. 15), p. 4.

[3] Ilmari Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms: Control of force, strategy and the Ukrainian volunteer battalions', *Defence Studies*, 18:2 (2018), p. 161.

Further, despite better social and economic benefits in the Ukrainian army, most of its combatants decided to remain in the RS VUC. This choice is not unique since globally, there is a growing tendency to join non-state military units.[4] However, there is no academic consensus over combatants' motivations to join and to fight with such paramilitary groups.[5] Therefore, these motivations make a compelling research topic.

Groups have numerous functions for the individual. They not only provide individuals with physical safety[6] but also satisfy emotional needs (such as belonging and inclusion,[7] self-esteem,[8] significance,[9] and meaning)[10] and reduce feelings of uncertainty about one's self and identity.[11] Since groups are fundamental to individuals, people are motivated to belong to, and be accepted by, groups that best satisfy the aforementioned needs.[12] Moreover, social psychology suggests a relationship between extremism, defined as a 'deviancy from a general pattern of behavior or attitude that prevails in a given social context',[13] and a person's experience of self-uncertainty.[14]

Several promising studies have focused on self-uncertainty to explain the motivations to join and to remain in extremist groups.[15] For instance, Michael Hogg argues that when individuals experience self-uncertainty, extremist groups, and ideologies become attractive partly because they provide clear structures.[16]

This has led us to use uncertainty-identity theory to investigate the attractiveness of RS VUC, motivating the fighters to join this organisation and to remain in it. Uncertainty-identity theory provides necessary analytical tools to understand why individuals both join and remain in extremist groups.[17] Thus, based on this theory, our study aims to advance an in-depth understanding of why these fighters find the RS VUC attractive.

We believe that this study will make important contributions in various academic fields. First, there are only few studies examining individuals who decide to fight in eastern Ukraine, and RS

[4]Robert S. Barrett, 'Interviews with killers: Six types of combatants and their motivations for joining deadly groups', Groups, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34:10 (2011), pp. 749–50.

[5]Siniša Malešević and Niall Ó. Dochartaigh, 'Why combatants fight: The Irish Republican army and the Bosnian Serb army compared', *Theory and Society*, 47:3 (2018), p. 293.

[6]Jerome D. Frank and Andrei Y. Melville, 'The image of the enemy and the process of change', in Anatoly Gromyko and Martin Hellman (eds), *Breakthrough: Emerging New Thinking* (New York, NY: Walker and Company, 1988), p. 199.

[7]Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, 'Motivational processes', in John F. Dovidio (ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2010), pp. 153–4.

[8]Jean-Claude Deschamps and Thierry Devos, 'Regarding the relationship between social identity and personal identity', in Stephen Worchel, J. Francisco, Dario Páez, and Jean-Claude Deschamps (eds), *Social Identity: International Perspectives* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 6.

[9]Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Ariel Kruglanski, 'Quest for significance and violent extremism: The case of domestic radicalization', *Political Psychology*, 38:5 (2017), pp. 817–18.

[10]Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, 'Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification', *Review of General Psychology*, 10:4 (2006), p. 303.

[11]Michael A. Hogg and Janice Adelman, 'Uncertainty-identity theory: Extreme groups, radical behavior, and authoritarian leadership', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69:3 (2013), p. 436.

[12]Ibid., p. 436.

[13]David Webber, Maxim Babush, Noa Schori-Eyal, Anna Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Manuel Moyano, Humberto M. Trujillo, Rohan Gunaratna, Arie W. Kruglanski, and Michele J. Gelfand, 'The road to extremism: field and experimental evidence that significance loss-induced need for closure fosters radicalization', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 114:2 (2018), p. 272.

[14]Michael A. Hogg, Arie Kruglanski, and Kees van den Bos, 'Uncertainty and the roots of extremism', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69:3 (2013), p. 413.

[15]Liran Goldman, Howard Giles, and Michael A. Hogg, 'Going to extremes: Social identity and communication processes associated with gang membership', *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 17:6 (2014); Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees van den Bos, 'Determinants of radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands: Personal uncertainty, perceived injustice, and perceived group threat', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69:3 (2013); Webber et al., 'The road to extremism'.

[16]Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos, 'Uncertainty and the roots of extremism', p. 413.

[17]Michael A. Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', in Michael A. Hogg and Danielle Blaylock (eds), *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

VUC fighters go largely unnoticed and unresearched. This can probably be ascribed to difficulties attaining reliable primary data and conducting field studies in the area.[18] Studies on the Right Sector (RS) that do exist are descriptive, focusing on the ideological dimensions of RS's political party and its role in the Maidan Revolution.[19] Second, social psychological research on extremism in general has been *quantitative* and *experimental*.[20] On the other hand, this study is a qualitative case study focusing on how the fighters themselves motivate their decision to join the RS VUC. Third, we believe that uncertainty-identity theory presents an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the fighters' decisions. Hence, sticking to the premises of naturalistic inquiry[21] and using the theory of uncertainty-identity, we claim that this study is a novel and unique contribution to the field.

The analysis will be organised according to four research questions, motivated by the tenets of uncertainty-identity theory. The first question concerns experiences of self-uncertainty, and the three following questions concern various coping strategies. These research questions will be discussed and theoretically contextualised in the theory section.

(1) How do the participants describe their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours (primarily regarding the conflict), and how do the participants experience the ones of the wider Ukrainian society?
(2) How do the participants describe RS VUC's group prototypes and their attractiveness for the participants?
(3) How do the participants describe RS VUC's entitativity and its attractiveness for the participants?
(4) How do the participants explain their motivations to participate in RS VUC's armed resistance in east Ukraine?

Historical background of the Ukrainian crisis

Since late 2013, Ukraine has experienced events that have profoundly changed its political landscape and brought about a conflict in eastern Ukraine.[22] In November of the same year, popular uprisings in Kiev arose in response to, among other issues, the failure of the government to seek closer ties with the EU.[23] Within a short period of time, small-scale protests escalated into a nationwide revolutionary force reacting to corruption and the inadequacy of the Yanukovych government.[24] The Maidan Revolution quickly turned into violent confrontations between protesters and the police. Activists, mainly with ultranationalist dispositions, swiftly organised and assisted protesters in fighting the police.[25] These violent confrontations resulted in over one hundred deaths and many injuries, and led to an interim government lacking legitimacy, especially in the eyes of Russia.[26] Eventually, the protests resulted in the overthrow of the pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovych, who fled to Russia in February 2014.[27] After Maidan, Ukraine became

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[18]Malyarenko and Galbreath, 'Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine', p. 117.

[19]Vyacheslav Likhachev, 'The "Right Sector" and others: The behavior and role of radical nationalists in the Ukrainian political crisis of late 2013 and early 2014', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 48:2–3 (2015); Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Far right participation in the Ukrainian Maidan protests: An attempt of systematic estimation', *European Politics and Society*, 17:4 (2016).

[20]Jeremy Ginges, Scott Atran, Sonya Sachdeva, and Douglas Medin, 'Psychology out of the laboratory: The challenge of violent extremism', *American Psychologist*, 66:6 (2011), p. 517.

[21]Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), pp. 39–41.

[22]Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 148.

[23]Serhy Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 3–4.

[24]Yuliya Zabyelina, 'Vigilante justice and informal policing in post-Euromaidan Ukraine', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35:4 (2019), p. 277.

[25]Ibid., p. 284.

[26]Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 148.

[27]Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, pp. 3–4.

'politically divided and institutionally fragmented'.[28] The victory of the protesters and the over-throw of president Yanukovych provoked Russia and contributed to the Russian annexation of Crimea.[29] Thereafter, Russia actively fuelled separatism in eastern Ukraine.[30] While the annex-ation of Crimea did not lead to any major Ukrainian resistance, the developments in Donbas turned into overt hostilities.[31]

In April to May 2014, when it became evident that the pro-Russian separatists strived to con-trol most of Donbas[32] and the Ukrainian army could not perform an effective military resistance, thousands of individuals, with little or no military experience, enrolled into non-state pro-Ukrainian battalions to fight the Russian-backed separatists.[33] According to Ukrainian law, explicit participation in any paramilitary battalion in open military confrontation is prohibited.[34] Nevertheless, far-right nationalist groups acted as guarantors of law and security through para-military formations that used extra-legal violence.[35] In 2015, Ukraine's new president, Petro Poroshenko, signed a decree calling all paramilitary battalions to 'disarm and subordinate' to either the MoD or MoIA.[36] Eventually, all but few Ukrainian volunteer paramilitary battalions were incorporated into formal defence and security structures,[37] making the RS VUC one of the few major non-state military units left.[38] After this incorporation, some fighters preferred to leave their now-state-controlled battalions and join the RS VUC.[39]

The RS was established during the Maidan Revolution in November 2013 when several nationalist, some even neo-Nazi, groups were united.[40] According to Vyacheslav Likhachev, during and after the revolution, the RS's extremist character was revealed by its hate crimes and attacks,[41] usage of neo-Nazi symbols,[42] and alleged destructions of Soviet monuments.[43] The RS VUC is one of the three branches of the RS, the other two being the RS political party and the RS Youth Movement.[44]

According to the RS, the main objective of the RS VUC is to achieve 'liberation of Ukraine from Kremlin's control' and to 'clean the Ukrainian government from internal oligarchic occupation'.[45]

Research overview

At the risk of simplification, previous research explaining individuals' tendency to join extremist groups can be divided into macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. At macro and meso levels,

[28]Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 151.

[29]Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 4.

[30]Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 148.

[31]Malyarenko and Galbreath, 'Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine', p. 113.

[32]Emmanuel Karagiannis, 'Ukrainian volunteer fighters in the eastern front: Ideas, political-social norms and emotions as mobilization mechanisms', *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16:1 (2016), p. 143.

[33]Ibid., p. 140.

[34]Malyarenko and Galbreath, 'Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine', p. 123.

[35]Zabyelina, 'Vigilante justice and informal policing', p. 277.

[36]Decree of the President of Ukraine, 'Pro zakhodi schodo posilennya borotbi zi zlochinnistyu v Ukraine [On Measures toward Intensification of Fight against Crimes in Ukraine]', Document No. 341/2015, 15 June 2015), cited in Malyarenko and Galbreath, 'Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine', p. 124.

[37]Puglisi, *Heroes or Villains*, p. 7; Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 159.

[38]Puglisi, *Heroes or Villains*, p. 7; Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 161.

[39]Käihkö, 'A nation-in-the-making, in arms', p. 162.

[40]Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland, 'The Maidan and beyond: Ukraine's radical right', *Journal of Democracy*, 25:3 (2014), p. 59.

[41]Likhachev, 'The "Right Sector" and others', p. 265.

[42]Ibid., p. 266.

[43]Ibid., p. 265.

[44]Pravyy Sektor Info, 'Добровольчий Український Корпус "Правий сектор"', available at: {https://pravyysektor.info/dobrovolchyy-ukrayinskyy-korpus-pravyy-sektor} accessed 16 July 2021.

[45]Ibid., p. 287. 'Internal olicarchic occupation' is an ambiguous expression that in anti-Semitic contexts is used as a code word for leading Ukrainian/Russian business men with Jewish background and possibly reflects anti-Semitic attitudes.

individuals' motivation to join extremist groups can be explained by *ideology*,[46] *small group solidarity*,[47] *ephemeral gain*,[48] *cultural dimensions*,[49] *social pressure*,[50] *social injustice*,[51] *collective emotions generated by external attacks*,[52] and *the role of social networks*.[53] On the other hand, micro-level factors explain individual predispositions and basic needs, and include *need for cognitive closure*,[54] *desire to attain meaning in one's life or a sense of personal significance*,[55] *maximisation of self-interest*,[56] and motivation to reduce self-uncertainty through *joining high entitativity groups with clear prototypes*.[57] In the following, we will briefly present research within these two categories.

The role of ideology as a motivational factor to join extremist groups, is contested. In his research on Wehrmacht soldiers' diaries and letters, Omer Bartov found ideology and extreme nationalism to be important factors in soldiers' decisions to participate in combat even towards the end of the Second World War.[58] Siniša Malešević and Niall Ó. Dochartaigh, on the other hand, claim that 'local neighborhood loyalties and identities' are much more important motivations than 'abstract ideological commitments to the nation'.[59]

Manus I. Midlarsky claims that historical trajectories, such as the threat and fear of reversion to an earlier state of subordination, can lead to political extremism.[60] The reason is a fear that the current more prosperous or stable situation is ephemeral (Midlarsky calls it 'ephemeral gain'), so a 'fear of reversion to an earlier subordinate condition'[61] might lead to political extremism.[62] Further, Michele J. Gelfand et al.[63] have studied the impact of cultural factors that might have repercussions on extremist behaviour. Their study suggests that participation in extremism may depend on factors such as: (1) the level of 'cultural fatalism'; (2) the level of 'cultural tightness' like 'solid norms and severe punishment for deviation from social norms'; (3) 'collectivism at the national level'; and (4) 'high male dominance and low gender egalitarianism'.[64] Research on collective action suggests that norms of reciprocity, social coercion, and the ensuing sanctions that may follow for not participating in collective action constitute social pressure, which instigates individuals to act.[65] Thus, social pressure theory might explain individual

[46]Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[47]Malešević and Dochartaigh, 'Why combatants fight'.

[48]Manus I. Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[49]Michele J. Gelfand, Gary LaFree, Susan Fahey, and Emily Feinberg, 'Culture and extremism', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69:3 (2013).

[50]Michael Taylor (ed.), *Rationality and Revolution* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[51]Susan T. Fiske, 'A millennial challenge: Extremism in uncertain times', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69:3 (2013).

[52]Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[53]Arie Kruglanski, Katarzyna Jasko, Marina Chernikova, David Webber, and Michelle Dugas, 'To the fringe and back: Violent extremism and the psychology of deviance', *American Psychologist*, 72:3 (2017).

[54]Arie Kruglanski and Edward Orehek, 'The need for certainty as a psychological nexus for individuals and society', in Hogg and Blaylock (eds), *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*.

[55]Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward, 'Terrorist (e)motives: The existential attractions of terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34:12 (2011); Webber et al, 'The road to extremism'.

[56]Mancur Olson, *Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); Jean-Paul Azam, 'On thugs and heroes: Why warlords victimize their own civilians', *Economics and Governance*, 7:1 (2006).

[57]Hogg, 'Self-identity, social identity, and the solace of extremism'.

[58]Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, p. 7.

[59]Malešević and Dochartaigh, 'Why combatants fight', p. 322.

[60]Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism*, p. 25.

[61]Manus I. Midlarsky, 'Territoriality and the onset of mass violence: The political extremism of Joseph Stalin', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11:2–3 (2009), p. 270.

[62]Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism*, p. 25.

[63]Gelfand et al., 'Culture and extremism'.

[64]Ibid., pp. 498–500.

[65]Michael Taylor, 'Rationality and revolutionary collective action', in Taylor (ed.), *Rationality and Revolution*, p. 66.

decisions to participate in collective action if a significant part of society sanctions and approves such an endeavour.[66]

Research has recognised social injustice as a potential trigger of uncertainty. This in turn boosts the attractiveness of extremist groups, who promise to provide 'certainty, dignity and voice'.[67] Born out of inequality and instability, 'discontent and uncertainty' empower and make attractive the groups pretending to confront the unjust elites on behalf of 'the people'.[68] Presenting the people as 'uncertain and out of control' paves the way for the 'certainty and control' offered by ideological groups that contest those in power.[69] Susan T. Fiske explains that lack of control leads to inefficient prediction of future events (uncertainty) and lack of control over people's own destiny (influence).[70] Thus, according to her, 'seeking epistemic certainty motivates extremism.'[71]

From the perspective of sociology of emotions, Randall Collins emphasises the role of external attacks, and he suggests that collective emotions that are the product of such attacks, have the potential to function as a big emotional magnet where the most mobilised parts of society charged with emotional energy come together to provide protection.[72]

Arie W. Kruglanski et al. suggest that social networks can potentially trigger and maintain extremist behaviour.[73] Social networks accomplish two motivational functions for individuals: 'informational and normative'.[74] Moreover, David Webber and Kruglanski discuss several factors that motivate individuals to engage in extremist behaviour: (1) personal motives derived from individual needs; (2) ideological narratives embedded within a culture; and (3) group pressure combined with strong social influence,[75] namely the influence within the individual's social network.[76]

Moving on to micro-level factors, individual predispositions to join extremist groups have been of interest for scholars within the field of social psychology. Kruglanski and Edward Orehek believe that the threat of uncertainty may generate extreme attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours due to an elevated 'epistemic need for closure' since such closure reduces feelings of uncertainty and 'quells the associated arousal'.[77] Accordingly, Kruglanski and Orehek propose that the higher the demand for cognitive closure, the stronger the appeal exerted by certain groups as unity and consistency providers.[78]

Webber et al. suggest that violent extremism may be motivated by an aspiration to reach and reinstate a meaningful life and a strong self-esteem.[79] The motivational constructs that may give rise to significance loss and violent extremism involve humiliation, injustice, and dishonour directed at one's social group.[80] Such defamation induces significance loss, especially among individuals who firmly identify with their in-group. For instance, the invasion of one's motherland impacts and weakens the shared significance of the whole nation, which can greatly intensify

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[66]Taylor, 'Rationality and revolutionary collective action'.

[67]Fiske, 'A millennial change', p. 608.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid, p. 609.

[71]Ibid, p. 608.

[72]Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, p. 80.

[73]Kruglanski et al., 'To the fringe and back', p. 220.

[74]Ibid.

[75]David Webber and Arie W. Kruglanski, 'Psychological factors in radicalization: A '3 N' approach', in Gary LaFree and Joshua D. Freilich (eds), *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism* (1st edn, Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), p. 33.

[76]Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization, Needs, Narratives, and Networks* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2019).

[77]Kruglanski and Orehek, 'The need for certainty as a psychological nexus for individuals and society', p. 12.

[78]Ibid., p. 4.

[79]Webber et al., 'The road to extremism', p. 271.

[80]Ibid.

extremist behaviour.[81] Moreover, numerous case studies have demonstrated that extremism and enhanced demand for closure are fuelled by experienced sentiments of insignificance.[82] Similarly, other scholars have underlined the role of significance gain. For example, Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward suggest that joining extremist groups alleviates feelings of 'existential frustration' in the midst of a boring and meaningless world.[83] The quest for violence and self-sacrifice becomes an opportunity for personal self-elevation, for instance, the attainment of a place in history as hero or martyr.[84]

Research on incentives to participate in collective action could also base its analysis on rational choice theory (RCT). Mancur Olson used RCT and argued that individuals are motivated to participate in collective action if it satisfies their self-interest.[85] Thus, individuals make rational decisions where they carefully contemplate about the advantages and disadvantages of their choice to participate,[86] and 'will engage in collective action only when they estimate that by doing so they will receive a net individual benefit'.[87] Also Jean-Paul Azam based his analysis on RCT and claimed that members of armed groups are motivated to participate in combat due to *financial gains* obtained through looting and plundering civilians.[88] Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Kocher, on the other hand, argued that joining an armed group during crisis and civil confrontation is a rational decision since it raises chances of *survival*.[89] Thus, RCT presupposes that 'human beings are rational and motivated by self-interest in their everyday actions.'[90]

Lastly, when individuals experience extreme uncertainty, their need for high entitativity groups, clear prototypes, and promotive and protective behaviours is enhanced.[91] In their quantitative study of Muslim Dutch adolescents, Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees van den Bos have found a causal relationship between 'personal uncertainty' and 'radical belief system'.[92] Another study of convicted religious extremists in the Philippines demonstrates that 'significance loss' weakened 'individual self-confidence', which in turn elevated the attractiveness of 'extreme ideologies that offer simplistic, certainty-affording worldviews'.[93] Thus, this research suggests that feelings of self-uncertainty can be reduced if an individual identifies with strongly entitative groups and that conditions of uncertainty can motivate individuals to participate in extremism.[94]

To summarise, it is reasonable to believe that the Ukrainian fighters' motivations to join extremist groups are affected by the macro, meso, and micro level factors discussed above. However, our study of RS VUC's attractiveness in the midst of Ukrainian identity crisis and social and political divisions,[95] focuses on social psychological factors, since we believe that

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid., p. 280.

[83]Cottee and Hayward, 'Terrorist (e)motives', pp. 978–9.

[84]Jerrold M. Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al Qaeda* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[85]Olson, *Logic of Collective Action*.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Michael Hechter, 'Rational choice theory and the study of race and ethnic relations', in John Rex and David Mason (eds), *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 271.

[88]Azam, 'On thugs and heroes'.

[89]Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Kocher, 'How "free" is free riding in civil wars? Violence, insurgency and the collective action problem', *World Politics*, 59:2 (2007).

[90]Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of Ethnicity* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 95.

[91]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 29.

[92]Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 'Determinants of radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands', pp. 589–90.

[93]Webber et al., 'The road to extremism', p. 274.

[94]Michael A. Hogg, Janice R. Adelman, and Robert D. Blagg, 'Religion in the face of uncertainty: An uncertainty-identity theory account of religiousness', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14:1 (2010), p. 79.

[95]Tatiana Zhurzhenko, 'A divided nation? Reconsidering the role of identity politics in the Ukrainian crisis', *Die Friedens-Warte*, 89:1/2 (2014).

such a study will produce new and relevant knowledge on fighters' motivations to join extremist groups.

Methodology

In this study, we used a constructivist and qualitative case study approach[96] since it enabled us to be flexible in the data collection process and analysis.[97] In the following, we will discuss selection of research participants, data allocation, analytical method, and research ethics.

Research participants

The research participants in this study are nine fighters of the RS VUC, seven males and two females. All were paramilitary combatants except one young woman, who served as an armed paramedic. Five of the research participants joined RS VUC in 2014, four of them joined between 2017 and 2019. The age of the research participants ranges from 19 to 50. One interviewee was from Kiev, two from Donetsk, and the rest were from the Odesa region. Although five of the research particpants came from mixed Russian-Ukrainian families, all of them considered Ukrainian as their mother tongue. The educational level of the research participants varied. Four had completed undergraduate degrees, and one had left university without completing, when the war started. The rest had high school degrees. Access to research participants was not without challenges, and it required time in the field to gain their trust. The strategy was to establish contact with gatekeepers and key informants long before departing to the field.[98] For a case study of a limited group, purposeful and snowball sampling of participants were relevant.[99] Accordingly, the interviewed fighters advised and assisted in contacting other relevant fighters.

Data collection

The premises of uncertainty-identity theory guided the data collection, which was conducted during two months of fieldwork in Ukraine between 19 March and 21 May 2019 and online in December 2020. This means that most of the interviews took place after the Minsk II agreement in 2015, and at that time there was a fragile ceasefire negotiated under the auspices of OSCE Minsk Group. Since Khalil Mutallimzada (KM) speaks Russian (his first language) and has a personal experience of post-Soviet and war-torn Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, he collected the data. Most of the research participants were aware that Azerbaijan, just like Ukraine, experienced Russian-backed separatism. Consequently, KM's ethnic background made the relationship between him and the research participants more open and trustful. Moreover, KM's fluency in Russian increased trust, which made the research participants comfortable to speak freely. Still, we cannot deny that KM's Caucasian background might have influenced the research participants, and made them less willing to express racist or anti-Semitic attitudes in his presence.

[96]Bedrettin Yazan, 'Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake', *The Qualitative Report*, 20:2 (2015), pp. 137, 142.

[97]Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 9; Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 28.

[98]John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th edn, Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2017), p. 150.

[99]Daniel F. Chambliss and Russell K. Schutt, *Making Sense of the Social World: Methods of Investigation* (5th edn, Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2016), p. 105.

Primary data was collected through in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews,[100] which provided the opportunity to ask both predetermined and follow-up questions.[101] In total, ten, approximately one-hour-long interviews were conducted and recorded. Research participant 1 was interviewed twice. The interviews focused on key themes related to the research questions of this study.

Primary data was also derived from direct observations (61 hours altogether) during daily interactions with the research participants, where KM's role was more of an observer than a participant. KM's presence in the events and activities of the RS VUC gave him access to the fighters of this volunteer battalion and its different paramilitary corps.

The data triangulation essential for case-study research[102] was completed through document review, namely information about the RS VUC in the RS organisational newspaper, *Pravyi Sektor*, brochures, and websites.

Research sites

Initially, we planned to conduct this study only in the city of Odesa. The choice of a second research site and the eventual trip to the Donetsk region were driven by the need to observe and interview fighters in the war zone. Consequently, relying on the emergent design of the qualitative case study,[103] KM observed and interviewed some RS VUC fighters in Karlivka, a town in the Donetsk region. Five interviews were conducted in Odesa, two in Karlivka, and three online.

Qualitative content analysis

Unlike most research using uncertainty-identity theory, this study used qualitative content analysis to interpret the data. Qualitative content analysis is 'a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.'[104] This analysis applied a 'directed approach'[105] and 'open coding', where the goal was to identify data with words and utterances that addressed the issues related to the theoretical framework and research questions.[106] This kind of coding allowed the categories to derive from the theory.[107] However, along with predetermined codes, codes also emerged from the data, which made the analysis flexible.[108] We coded the data into appropriate clusters of information, from which we developed further categories into thematic patterns.[109]

Dependability, credibility, and transferability

We have undertaken a few measures to ensure academic rigour. First, we used transparent data allocation and peer debriefing to warrant consistency[110] and dependability.[111] Second, we ensured

[100]Karen Brounéus, 'In-depth interviewing: The process, skill and ethics of interviews in peace research', in Karen Höglund and Magnus Öberg (eds), *Understanding Peace Research: Methods and Challenges* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 130.

[101]Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, p. 28.

[102]Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, p. 107.

[103]Ibid., p. 9.

[104]Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15:9 (2005), p. 1278.

[105]Ibid., pp. 1281–3.

[106]Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2015), p. 208.

[107]Hsieh and Shannon, 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', p. 1281.

[108]Ibid., pp. 1281–2.

[109]David L. Morgan, 'Qualitative content analysis: A guide to paths not taken', *Qualitative Health Research*, 3:1 (1993), pp. 114–16; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, p. 187.

[110]Helen Noble and Joanna Smith, 'Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research', *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 18:2 (2015), p. 34.

[111]Andrew K. Shenton, 'Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects', *Education for Information*, 22:2 (2004), p. 64.

confirmability through data triangulation, thick and rich description, as well as researcher reflexivity. To enhance credibility, we provided the research participants with the raw interview transcripts and the draft of the preliminary analysis of themes.

Transferability is generally problematic in qualitative research, since 'the findings of a qualitative study are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals.'[112] Yet, we ensure transferability through 'rich and thick description of the phenomenon under investigation', which will enable the juxtaposition of our findings with readers' experiences in other contexts.[113]

Research ethics

Since the research participants were all fighters in the RS VUC, identifying them by their names or even their combat pseudonyms may endanger and harm their lives. Therefore, we refer to the research participants as participants 1, 2, 3, and so on.

During the fieldwork, KM was aware of power imbalances between the researcher and the research participants. Therefore, he made all efforts to be polite, honest, sincere, respectful, and reciprocal with the research participants.[114] Permissions were gained before an interview or participant observation, and everything was agreed upon in advance with the gatekeepers. KM let the research participants speak for themselves in a comfortable and non-coercive environment. During the observations, KM tried not to disrupt the activities of the research participants to better understand their experiences in the real-life setting.

Analytical framework

Deriving from social identity theory and social-categorisation theory,[115] uncertainty-identity theory is 'a social psychological theory on the motivational role played by self-uncertainty in group processes and intergroup relations'.[116] This theory explains how social identity processes are motivated by peoples' need to reduce uncertainty about themselves[117] and how these processes, under certain conditions, promote extreme behaviour and attachment to extremist groups.[118] A key assumption is that feelings of uncertainty are heinous because they make people uncertain about things related to self, identity,[119] and behaviour.[120] Therefore, uncertainty has 'a powerful motivational effect',[121] prompting people to 'behavior aimed at reducing uncertainty'.[122] Extremist groups are often attractive since identification with such groups might reduce uncertainty,[123] and group identification in extreme groups serves as a powerful motivational force.[124] Identification with groups is certainly

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[112]Ibid., p. 69.

[113]Ibid., p. 70; Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic*, p. 125.

[114]John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2014), pp. 98–100.

[115]Henri Tajfel, 'Cognitive aspects of prejudice', *Journal of Social Issues*, 25:4 (1969); Henri Tajfel, 'Social identity and intergroup behavior', *Social Science Information*, 13:2 (1974).

[116]Joseph A. Wagoner and Michael A. Hogg, 'Uncertainty-identity theory', in Virgil Zeigler-Hill and Todd K. Shackelford (eds), *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publisher, 2017), p. 1.

[117]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 20.

[118]Ibid., pp. 27–8.

[119]Ibid., p. 21.

[120]Ibid., pp. 20–1.

[121]Michael A. Hogg, 'Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization: A motivational theory of social identity processes', *European Review of Social Psychology*, 11:1 (2000), p. 227.

[122]Hogg and Adelman, 'Uncertainty-identity theory', p. 438.

[123]Viviane Seyranian, 'Constructing extremism uncertainty provocation and reduction by extremist leaders', in Hogg and Blaylock (eds), *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*, pp. 238–9.

[124]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 19.

not a panacea for reducing uncertainty, but it is remarkably efficient to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty.[125]

Uncertainty-identity theory stipulates that uncertainty can emerge for different reasons. Economic crisis, immigration, regime collapse, civil war, and climate change can all provoke intense and lasting feelings of uncertainty.[126] It can also develop if people find that their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours are in sharp contrast with the rest of society.[127] Consequently, our first research question concerns how the participants describe their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours primarily regarding the conflict and how the participants experience the ones of the wider Ukrainian society.

Our second and third research questions concern the attractiveness of the RS VUC. According to uncertainty-identity theory, groups with clear *prototypes* and high *entitativity* (these concepts will be discussed below) are usually very attractive since they tend to have strong uncertainty-reducing effects. Hence, through our second research question, we will analyse how the participants describe the RS VUC's group prototypes and their attractiveness for the participants. Human groups are cognitively represented by group prototypes or features such as attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, values, feelings, and behaviours.[128] Group prototypes have the following main functions: they define a category and differentiate it from other categories and they prescribe group members' behaviour.[129] Typical prescribed behaviour is intergroup discrimination, in-group favouritism, in-group solidarity, and social cohesion.[130] Most importantly, groups with clear prototypes have strong uncertainty-reducing effects, in at least two ways: First, a group characterised by straightforward, clearly articulated, and explicit normative prototypes is more effective in reducing uncertainty than a group characterised by intricate, ambiguous, and prescriptively vague prototypes since group members know the boundaries of the group and can easily distinguish group members from individuals belonging to out-groups.[131] Second, the uncertainty-reducing effect of clear group prototypes is enhanced if they instruct the individual how to behave and if they reshape self-conception by assimilating the individual's 'attitudes, feelings and behaviors to the in-group prototype',[132] so the self becomes altered to suit the prototypical qualities of a group.[133] Such an assimilation of the self to the in-group prototype is one 'mechanism of uncertainty reduction',[134] and cohesive groups with clear prototypes facilitate this process.[135]

Moreover, the motivational role of prototypes also urges people to look for groups sharing their values[136] since uncertainty motivates them to identify with like-minded people and to join cohesive social groups.[137] Likewise, under *normal* conditions, rigidly and hierarchically structured groups with intolerance of internal dissent and criticism[138] can appear as unappealing since authoritarian groups control almost every aspect of one's life and identity. However, for the same reason, they may be attractive under conditions of extreme and enduring uncertainty.[139] Under

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[125]Ibid., p. 22.

[126]Wagoner and Hogg, 'Uncertainty-identity thoery', pp. 4–5.

[127]Hogg, 'Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization', p. 233.

[128]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 22.

[129]Ibid.

[130]Michael A. Hogg, 'Uncertainty and extremism: Identification with high entitativity groups under conditions of uncertainty', in Vincent Yzerbyt, Charles M. Judd, and Olivier Corneille (eds), *The Psychology of Group Perception* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2004), p. 264.

[131]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 24.

[132]Hogg, 'Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization', p. 227.

[133]Ibid., p. 233.

[134]Hogg, 'Uncertainty and extremism', p. 266.

[135]Hogg, 'Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization', p, 224.

[136]Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos, 'Uncertainty and the roots of extremism' p. 410.

[137]Ibid.

[138]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 25.

[139]Ibid.

these circumstances, extremist groups do an excellent job of reducing self-uncertainty because,[140] as a member, you know exactly who you are and how you should behave and how others are expected to behave.[141]

Before dealing with the third research question, we need to elaborate on the concept *entitativity*. Entitativity refers to the unity and coherence of a group. High entitativity groups typically demonstrate in-group loyalty, unambiguous ideological belief systems, low levels of in-group dissent, and us versus them mentality, and they view out-groups as fundamentally wrong, perhaps evil and immoral.[142] The greater the consensus among group members regarding the above, the greater is the group's entitativity.[143] Belonging to a high entitativity group may be attractive, since it has a strong uncertainty-reducing effect.[144] Moreover, it seems that such groups are best at reducing uncertainty in extreme situations,[145] as well as in times of uncertainty.[146] Extremist groups are highly entitative and therefore appealing for people experiencing extreme uncertainty.[147] Therefore, our *third research question* deals with entitativity within the RS VUC, namely how the participants describe the RS VUC's entitativity and its attractiveness for them.

Lastly, and leading to our fourth research question, another uncertainty-reducing strategy is to join extremist groups,[148] since uncertainty urges people 'to defend their in-group from threatening out-groups'.[149] We deem the choice to join a paramilitary group such as RS VUC as extreme behaviour since this is to deviate from a general pattern of behaviour or attitude in the Ukrainian context.[150] In times of uncertainty, the need for cognitive closure, defined as 'the desire for firm, unambiguous worldviews'[151] is aroused.[152] In this situation, people are more likely to view out-groups negatively; more likely to favour harsh treatment of out-groups in conflict management;[153] and more willing to take part in antisocial, disruptive, and aggressive actions.[154]

Findings

The analysis is divided into four parts corresponding to the research questions and the theoretical framework discussed above.

Experiencing contrasting understandings of the conflict

In the data where the fighters describe their relationship to different parts of the Ukrainian society, the fighters clearly experience that their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviour regarding the conflict sharply contrast with various segments of society. A first sharp contrast concerns perceptions regarding the current situation at the frontline. In the summer of 2020, a comprehensive ceasefire and truce were reached between Russia and Ukraine. Relying on media outlets, many Ukrainians believe that the hostilities have ceased. However, the interviews from December 2020 show that participants 1 and 9 have deviating experiences from the war zone. They underline that

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[140]Ibid., pp. 25–6.

[141]Ibid., p. 26.

[142]Michael A. Hogg, 'Uncertainty, social identity, and ideology', in Shane R. Thye and Edward J. Lawler (eds), *Social Identification in Groups*, vol. 22 (Amsterdam: JAI Press Inc., 2005), p. 215.

[143]Kruglanski and Orehek, 'The need for certainty as a psychological nexus for individuals and society', p. 4.

[144]Hogg, 'Subjective uncertainty reduction through self-categorization', p. 248.

[145]Hogg, 'Uncertainty, social identity, and ideology', p. 206.

[146]Ibid., p. 216; Hogg, 'Uncertainty and extremism', p. 271.

[147]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', pp. 25–6.

[148]Ibid., pp. 29–30.

[149]Wagoner and Hogg, 'Uncertainty-identity theory', pp. 4–5.

[150]Webber et al., 'The road to extremism', p. 272.

[151]Kruglanski, Bélanger, and Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization*, p. 47.

[152]Kruglanski and Orehek, 'The need for certainty as a psychological nexus for individuals and society', p. 15.

[153]Ibid.

[154]Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos, 'Uncertainty and the roots of extremism', p. 413.

'in real life there is no ceasefire'[155] and 'what they tell us on TV and what people read in the information channels is not true.'[156]

Other contrasts regarding the understanding of the conflict concern attitudes. First, in the interaction with ordinary citizens, some fighters experience a lack of Ukrainian consensus regarding the conflict, as well as unclear boundaries between Ukraine and its enemies. For instance, participant 2 compares ordinary Ukrainians to people in the war zone:

> Everything was simple in the war zone. There is a clear delimitation between the enemy and us. … But in general, it's easier there. Everything is clear there. … Here, I am surrounded by unpleasant people, and in fact, there is nothing you can do about it. … But in the war zone, basically it would be possible to do something about it.[157]

Participant 2 evidently prefers the war zone, where she is surrounded by people who share her understanding of the conflict, to the more complex Ukrainian society. The 'unpleasant people' are probably people whom she suspects support 'the enemy' and whose understanding of the conflict differs from hers. Participant 6, in Karlivka, shares this understanding, but goes further. He describes his relationship with internal enemies and Ukrainian citizens, at least occasionally, as problematic:

> People have become terrible. … Firstly, there are many refugees, and among them there are separatists who fought on the other side. … Here [in the war zone], I have a weapon and the sworn brothers. I feel more confident and calm here. But this situation needs somehow to be changed. The more we are [ideologically united] the more chances we have to change something. … They will say that there is no war and that nobody has sent us here. We are dying here so that people in the civilian life could live in peace, and they hate us.[158]

This experience of belonging to an ideological minority is probably more evident when the participants wear their uniform publicly. Participant 1 says:

> Let's compare Odesa with Dnipro. When I was in the military hospital in Dnipro, people used to approach and thank me when they saw my uniform with RS VUC insignia. When I came to Odesa in uniform, people looked at me like as I was going to rob someone. … I try not to wear my uniform in Odesa. They treat us differently in Odesa.[159]

Participant 2 also describes her experiences wearing a uniform in Odesa. Not only does she describe lacking entitativity in the Ukrainian society, where the boundary between 'enemies' and 'friends' is blurred. She also experiences that many Odessites, perhaps a majority, perceive the conflict differently to her. This made her long for the frontline when she returned to Odesa:

> I wanted to go back [after the first rotation] to the frontline because I felt morally comfortable there. Back then, when people in Ukraine saw me in military uniform, they looked at me angry like a wolf. It was especially the case in Odesa, where people have different views about the conflict. … There is a bunch of local separatists, many of whom did not understand what we were doing. People had different reactions when they saw me in military uniform. I tried not to pay attention. There were unpleasant looks. … There were people who came up and

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[155]Participant 1, online, 17 December 2020.
[156]Participant 9, online, 22 December 2020.
[157]Participant 2, Odesa, Ukraine, 26 April 2019.
[158]Participant 6, Karlivka, Ukraine, 5 May 2019.
[159]Participant 1, Odesa, Ukraine, 8 April 2019.

thanked me. Once I was even offered a free coffee. The reaction of people differed in Odesa. Yet, I think here in Odesa many would be glad either to war or for the arrival of the Russian world. For example, in Odesa, we can say that I am not a Russian and not a Ukrainian but Odessit. This is how people separate themselves from Ukraine.[160]

Also participant 9 is very troubled by the fact that a vast majority of the Ukrainian electorate (73 per cent he claims) elected a pro-Russian president, and he is referring to those voters as 'dumbfuckers' (*dolboyebi*).[161] His conviction that only a small minority shares his perception of the conflict, indicates that he experiences not only a lack of Ukrainian entitativity but also a clear minority status and believes that a vast majority has views regarding the conflict that are in sharp contrast to his. Participant 8 goes even further, he encounters Ukrainians who do not understand this war as a conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but rather as a civil war, where RS VUC is shooting at fellow Ukrainians.[162]

RS VUC fighters' experiences are similarly confirmed by KM's observations, previous research, and public opinion polls. KM observed a posthumous reward ceremony held at Donetsk National Technical University in commemoration of a fallen RS VUC fighter. When KM arrived, he could not find the place where the event was held and had to ask a charwoman for directions. When asked for directions, she replied with an arrogant tone, 'they do not deserve to be rewarded.' KM observed another incident when he took a bus with participant 1 in Odesa. Despite the legal privileges that volunteer fighters enjoy from the Ukrainian state, including free public transportation, participant 1 still paid for his bus ticket. When KM asked why he did not make use of his privilege, he answered, 'once I showed my military passport to the bus driver in Odesa, and I was publicly ridiculed and mocked for not having seven *hryvnia* to pay for my bus ticket. Since that incident, I don't use my military passport in public transportation any more.'[163] Also participant 9 experienced unpleasant attitudes on public transportation, where he experienced criticism and humiliation for being a combatant: 'They told me … that if I am a combatant, then I am bad, that I am a *khokhol*, that I am Ukrainian.'[164]

Moreover, a study by Tatiana Zhurzhenko confirms that our participants regularly encounter Ukrainians who perceive the conflict differently to them. According to her, Ukraine is a 'divided nation', lacking social cohesion[165] and the dividing lines in Ukrainian society have deepened as a result of the conflict.[166] And lastly, a few polls regarding the attitudes of Ukrainians confirm that the views regarding the status of Donbas are in contrast with our research participants. One poll concludes that only a small percentage (17–23 per cent) in the years 2017–19 support armed resistance until full Ukrainian control of Donbas is regained.[167]

Likewise, a few participants experience that judicial, military, and political systems as well as some high-ranking politicians and other people with influence also do not share their understanding of the conflict. In addition to experiencing a rejection from the Ukrainian military, participant 1 claims that 'oligarchs'[168] and parts of the judicial system work against his beliefs and constitute an 'invisible' internal enemy:

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[160]Participant 2.

[161]Participant 9.

[162]Participant 8, online, 22 December 2020.

[163]Participant 1, 2019.

[164]Participant 9. *Khokhols* are often depicted as illiterate peasants with primitive manners and peculiar local dialect, and are subjected to ethnic and social othering. See Mykola Riabchuk, 'Ukrainians as Russia's negative "other": History comes full circle', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 49 (2016), p. 77.

[165]Zhurzhenko, 'A divided nation?', p. 249.

[166]Ibid., p. 263.

[167]Rating Group Ukraine, 'Ставлення українців до вирішення питання окупованих територій' (October 2019), available at: {http://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_donbas_102019.pdf} accessed 16 July 2021.

[168]See comment in fn. 43.

We have an external enemy with whom we are at war at the moment. There are also a lot of internal enemies. There are all sorts of pro-Russian people and oligarchs. … I would say that it is even more complicated with internal enemies than it is in the trenches. I feel more confident in the war zone. There, you know where the enemy is. Here in the civilian life, everything is much more complicated, and the law is sometimes against us here. In the civilian life, there seems to be an enemy, but an invisible one.[169]

Moreover, participant 6 experiences how the values of the judicial system contrast his own and is particularly frustrated that 'most of them (separatists) were simply amnestied.'[170] Participant 3 indicates that political attitudes of high-ranking politicians added to his experience of not seeing the conflict in the same way as the rest of society. In a discussion about the 2019 presidential elections, this participant was very sceptical about the candidates' attitudes to the conflict:

We will soon have presidential elections, and we have to choose between a clown and a moron. Well, is it serious to choose a clown and a moron? … If Zelensky is elected, we will have a country of clowns. Zelensky is not a man who can even be put close to Putin. It becomes clear that we will not have a real ruler in this country.[171]

Lastly, a third and important relationship is the fighters' ties to their families and close friends. If not even close relationships are always trustful, and if the fighters do not experience a harmony of attitudes regarding the conflict even from friends and family, this will probably contribute to intense and lasting feelings of uncertainty. Participant 9 has 'deleted' many old friends from his life, people who now called RS VUC fighters 'Banderites, Nazis, fascists and so on.'[172] Participant 3 has a similar experience:

People cannot be trusted here, and you never know what to expect. … I would like to trust other people, even my relatives. But I don't know how I can trust them! Because when I said that I was going to war, everyone became cold with me. I then realised that I cannot rely on these people. It is not good! I would like to have support, but I do not see a drop of it. They think that it is wrong, that I'm going to protect my country. They begin to treat you differently. … When you feel and understand that you are treated differently, that feeling encourages aggressive behaviour.[173]

Nevertheless, not all participants experience this kind of disharmony with friends and family. For instance, participants 6 and 8 were accompanied in the war zone by their wives, who shared their understanding of the conflict. Likewise, participant 5, the paramedic, underlines that there were other fighters in her family: her uncle, younger brother, and ex-boyfriend. She even claims that she was convinced to join the RS VUC in order to support them and to contribute to the war effort.

The attractiveness of group prototypes

This section and the next one concern the attractiveness of the RS VUC. In the present one, we will analyse how the participants describe the RS VUC's group prototypes and the motivational role prototypes have for them.

A first function of group prototypes concerns intergroup discrimination and in-group favouritism. Along with pro-Russian Ukrainian citizens mentioned in the previous section, another

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[169]Participant 1, 2019.
[170]Participant 6.
[171]Participant 3, Odesa, Ukraine, 9 April 2019.
[172]Participant 9.
[173]Ibid.

discriminated outgroup is, unexpectedly, *not* pro-Russian separatists but the regular Ukrainian army.[174] Most of the participants divide the combatants into 'us' – the 'volunteers', who are 'a new model army', free from 'Soviet idiocy',[175] 'morally motivated',[176] 'more decisive and ideologically committed',[177] supposedly dedicated to their country and 'make a conscious decision when they join a volunteer battalion',[178] who 'risk their lives not for the sake of money'[179] – and 'them' the 'regular soldiers [who] saw the fighting as a job'[180] the 'money-makers' who join the regular army to 'receive salaries'[181] or other privileges. Participant 7 develops the difference between the regular army and the RS VUC further:

> So many 'are present' … I repeat, just 'present' in this war to just receive salaries. They just want to spend their time and get their payment until their contract ends. In a volunteer battalion like this, everything is different. We have never been paid for our duty. Volunteer battalions always fought and are fighting on an ideological basis, and not for receiving benefits.[182]

This division between the alleged superior volunteers and the inferior Ukrainian army was confirmed during an observation made when KM was on his way to the frontline village Karlivka. KM saw military check points with trenches every ten kilometres. KM's gatekeeper and participants 6 and 7 explained that there are three lines of defence. The first and most dangerous one, lies at the frontline, 1–2 km from the enemy. This line of defence mainly consists of RS VUC fighters. The second and third ones are relatively safe and consist of the regular Ukrainian army soldiers.

Participant 6 left the regular army and joined the RS VUC. While telling the history of his enrolment process, he also expresses in-group favouritism. According to him, the fighting morale is at the lowest level in the regular army, unlike in the RS VUC:

> At the end of 2014, I signed a contract with the regular army that lasted until 2016. … I was tired of the lawlessness in the army. Eventually I decided to join RS VUC. … In RS VUC, there is a great freedom. I know that the people who surround me here are like-minded and if there is an open fight no one will hide in the trenches as the regular combatants would usually do … RS VUC fighters are the true patriots![183]

In the above utterance, participant 6 expresses not only in-group favouritism (patriotism and freedom instead of lawlessness and cowardness) but also group sharing prototypes (being like-minded) that instruct the individual how to behave (not hiding in the trenches). Participant 1, below, also combines in-group favouritism (no mess and no irrelevant orders) and shared group prototypes (relevant orders) that dictate behaviour:

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[174]The status of the Armed Forces of Ukraine reported by our research participants is confirmed by external sources. According to Malyarenko and Galbreat, the army suffered from widespread corruption, acts of betrayal, and inadequacy. See Malyarenko and Galbreat, 'Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine', p. 120.

[175]Participant 8. Participant 9, added flawed 'Soviet structures'.

[176]Participant 9.

[177]Participant 1, 2019.

[178]Participant 6.

[179]Participant 7, Karlivka, Ukraine, 6 May 2019. Also Participant 1, 2019 and participant 8 underline that RS VUC fighters are not motivated by financial rewards.

[180]Participant 2.

[181]Participant 6.

[182]Participant 7.

[183]Participant 6. Similar claims were made by Participants 8 and 9.

The most important thing about RS VUC is that here there is no such mess as in the army. On the contrary, I liked everything and wanted to continue my duty. Fighters of RS VUC are more ideological and are less afraid. In RS VUC, there are no irrelevant orders as in the regular army. There is only one order, and it is the victory![184]

In fact, the aversion towards the regular army is of such a magnitude that the RS VUC's commander in chief, Andriy Stempitskiy, is sceptical about future legalisation and incorporation of his paramilitary group since that would 'repeat the fate of dozens of other volunteer units that eventually joined the ranks of the Armed Forces and other law enforcement structures. ... all these battalions ceased to exist as volunteer groups.'[185]

The attractiveness of group entitativity

Group entitativity had an important motivational role for the fighters' decision to join and remain in the RS VUC. The participants unanimously depict the RS VUC as a high entitativity group. In the quotes below, they label their paramilitary group members as 'true friends', 'family', and 'brothers and sisters' and claim that the RS VUC provides protection, trust, and safety:

I can't imagine my life without RS VUC. I think this feeling is forever. Thanks to my experience in the war zone, I now have friends all over Ukraine. ... These are the ones I can rely on. ... True friends, not those who just want to drink beer and spend some time with you.[186]

There are so many things that I have experienced which I cannot explain to my mother, my daughter, because they simply will not understand ... My *pobratimi* and I are people who have seen and experienced death together. They are dearer to me than my own family.[187]

When I spent the first three months with the members of RS VUC, it was just like a family, everyone treated each other like they were brothers and sisters. ... I have a 100 per cent confidence and devotion to RS VUC because I saw how they live and what they do to live freely. ... Of course, I trust *pobratimi* in RS VUC more. I know that they will not leave me, that I have protection, in case something bad happens with me. ... I have more confidence in RS VUC than my family and friends.[188]

Participant 3 above is not alone in trusting RS VUC's protection. Participant 4 is also convinced that the RS VUC will protect him, both now and after military service:

The most important thing is of course the support of the organisation. God forbid, if something happens, there is a support. ... Here, everyone is responsible for each other. ... It works like one for all and all for one. The organisation even helps homeless and unemployed fighters. When volunteer fighters return from the war zone, the organisation supports them both mentally and physically.[189]

Moreover, we claim that the entitativity in the RS VUC was enhanced not only through the horizontal bonds between the fighters but also through the experience of justice and equality in vertical relations with the commanders:

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[184]Participant 1, 2019. Also Participants 8 and 9 agree that there are no 'foolish' orders in RS VUC.

[185]Andriy Stempitskiy, interviewed in Командир ДУК ПС Андрій Стемпіцький 'Скільки Буде Тривати Війна – Стільки Будет Діяти ДУК "Правий Сектор"', *Правий Сектор: Інформаційний Бюлетень*, 5:21 (2018).

[186]Participant 1, 2019.

[187]Participant 9.

[188]Participant 3.

[189]Participant 4, Odesa, Ukraine, 4 April 2019.

For all the time that I was on the frontline, I did not quarrel with anyone. Everything felt so fraternal, … we shared everything we had. There was a commander, but everyone was treated equally.[190]

The RS VUC's high entitativity likely also affects attitudes and behaviour patterns within this paramilitary group, namely, how the fighters are treated and treat each other. Some participants[191] emphasise the prevalence of hazing and abuse of power in the regular army as a reason for enroling in the RS VUC. Participant 1 claims that 'unlike the regular army, we do not have such thing as hazing in RS VUC. Many drop out from the army for this reason. They join us after their contract ends.'[192] Participant 2 agrees:

The act of hazing is absent in volunteer battalions. We are as family here. Even the commander communicates with his subordinates on equal terms. Everything is built on trust, not submission. This is one team where everyone trusts each other.[193]

Entitativity was expressed even clearer in KM's observations of the participants' interactions. KM observed that the fighters were not referring to each other as friends or comrades. They called each other 'sworn brothers' – *pobratimi* in Ukrainian. KM heard the fighters pronounce these or similar terms very often in their habitat. Participant 3, who lost his parents in childhood and was raised in an orphanage, captures the core of the miraculous power of brotherhood:

I have no fear when I understand that I belong to the brotherhood! … Seriously! I had fear before, but now I am getting rid of this fear. I'm no longer afraid of loneliness. I'm not afraid that if something happens to me, no one will know about it.[194]

Similarly, participant 4 describes the necessity of sharing the same understanding of the conflict (common language) and the attractiveness of belonging to *pobratimi*:

The most important thing is to find a common language with the *pobratimi* … I am proud to be a member of the RS VUC. This is very appealing since everyone has one idea! To defend the fatherland. But the most attractive thing is the idea of brotherhood.[195]

It is also likely that high entitativity indeed had uncertainty-reducing effects on the participants. In his observations, KM was told that the fighters were sure that, unlike other people in their surroundings, their comrades in the battalion will never abandon or betray them. This confidence reduced their feelings of self-uncertainty. Participant 3, above, clearly connects reduction of fear to his experience of brotherhood. Participant 1, below, also underlines that his group makes him feel safe in this time of uncertainty, and he believes that 'he will not be abandoned':

RS VUC does not offer mountains of gold. I only know that if a person returns crippled or wounded, he will not be abandoned. It's probably like a family, a brotherhood. Anyone here will be supported to the end, because he is one of us! … He was with us and fought with us for our land.[196]

[190]Participant 1, 2019.
[191]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2 and 6.
[192]Participant 1, 2019.
[193]Participant 2, 2019.
[194]Participant 3.
[195]Participant 4.
[196]Participant 1, 2019.

Participant 6 also connects entitativity and reduction of uncertainty. He recalls that despite the fear he had, the fact that he was surrounded by people who in no circumstances would betray him made him more courageous: 'there was a fear, but you still feel that it's your duty to remain loyal to people who treat you as a brother. Your body says no, but your soul says yes.'[197]

RS VUC's group entitativity was also evident in their in-group behaviour and in the meaning members ascribed this behaviour. For instance, during KM's observation of the RS VUC base in Karlivka, an ambulance arrived with a wounded fighter in need of a blood transfusion before transport to the military hospital in Dnipro in the neighbouring region. There was another fighter with same blood type who immediately agreed to help. He gave approximately 500 milliliters of blood. KM was around when this happened, and the fighter who was about to donate blood said, 'Before we were brothers in words, but now we are crowned to be brothers, because he will have my blood flowing in his veins.' KM recalls that those fighters whose blood did not match became somewhat envious for not being able to contribute.

Likewise, in Odesa, when fighters faced difficulties in their everyday lives, KM observed that they turned to the *pobratimi* as their social safety network. The difficulties in question ranged from bureaucratic procedures to private issues, such as renovating or building a house or giving emotional support:

> If my *pobratim* calls me at 3 o'clock, at 4 o'clock or at 5 in the morning and asks me to come because he feels bad, I won't even ask why he feels bad. I'll just go to him. Maybe he just wanted to smoke a cigarette with me, or maybe he has got a problem. No matter what, we will solve it together. And in the same way, I know that if for some reason it becomes difficult for me, then I can rely on my *pobratimi*.[198]

When asked why they did not ask their family or relatives for help, the fighters referred to the level of trust. One of them said:

> My family members didn't understand the rationale of my war effort and accused me for joining the so called 'fascist' group. But members of this demonised group risked their lives with me. We were side by side and supported each other, and are still supporting each other, even though we are not at the frontline any more.[199]

Every time KM visited a posthumous reward ceremony or some other kind of commemoration, he witnessed a family-like social structure, an environment characterised by brotherhood. Despite their suspicion and distrust towards outsiders, they welcomed KM to these events and treated him with respect since he came with several *pobratimi* who interceded on his behalf. During meals at these events, KM had an impression that there was a sense of belonging among *pobratimi*. The fighters behaved in concert; they stood up jointly when they drank vodka and commemorated fallen fighters or when they gave toasts or pronounced a slogan. KM saw the RS VUC as a group of people communicating without words. Participant 7 in Donetsk summarises it very well:

> It feels perfect here because we have very cohesive relationship. It is like a small family. When one needs something, all battalions unite to achieve the aim or to solve the issue. … Here, we know that any fighter will do everything to make his comrade feel good.[200]

[197]Participant 6.
[198]Participant 9.
[199]Participant 1, 2019.
[200]Participant 7.

Moreover, we believe that some fighters, having experienced a high entitativity group, reflected on, or expressed fear, to return to civilian life. For example, participant 1 describes that he never got the support he needed from anyone except his *pobratimi*:

I didn't expect the help and support I received from *pobratimi* when I was in the hospital. People I knew whole my life didn't come to see me. But my *pobratimi*, whom I have known just more than a year, were there for me and supported me in that difficult period of my life.[201]

The feeling of being safe within the RS VUC and unsafe outside in the civilian life was confirmed by several fighters. They told KM that they felt confident at the frontline with *pobratimi* but felt somewhat uncertain in the civilian life – even with their friends, relatives, and closest family members – due to the diverging views about their choice to be RS VUC fighters. According to participant 2, 8, and 9, this dissent in Ukrainian society was an outcome of Ukrainian consumption of Russian media outlets, which were later banned by the Poroshenko administration.

According to Participants 7, 8, and 9, even when the relationship between a fighter and his or her family members was good, nothing could replace the brotherlike relationship within the battalion. As one fighter explains:

Family is family, but here in the battalion we have another kind of family that cannot be found anywhere else. In this kind of family, there is no dissent, and there is high level of cohesion, loyalty, fidelity, mutual understanding, and respect. This brings me a feeling that people in my battalion are closer to me than … let's say my schoolmates, my cousins or even the family I was raised in.[202]

The data above indicates that RS VUC's high entitativity indeed has an uncertainty-reducing effect. Nevertheless, there is reason for caution. Along with uncertainty relating to self-identity, the participants also express uncertainty regarding physical security in war zones and social safety. On the other hand, uncertainty-identity theory concerns uncertainty about themselves, things related to self and identity in group processes. It is therefore doubtful whether all our findings are supported by the theory.

Lastly, it has to be underlined that not all the fighters' motivations to join the RS VUC can be attributed to group prototypes or group entitativity. A few participants mention practical reasons. For instance, the regular army placed Participant 8 in the reserve and was not in need of his services. Similarly, participant 4 explains that he, being raised in an orphanage, could not join the regular army since he did not have the required documents. Similarly, other participants[203] point to the bureaucracy in state structures:

I did not serve in the army through compulsory military service. Therefore, my case was lost. While I was recovering some lost papers, I was longing to enrol as a volunteer fighter. Regular army's recruitment office rejected my application and told me that I have first to serve the compulsory military service. I don't know whether they wanted money, or they were just fools … Honestly, from the beginning, I wanted to join RS VUC because it is much cooler to be here than in the army.[204]

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[201]Participant 1, 2019.
[202]Participant 7.
[203]Participant 1, 2019; participant 2.
[204]Participant 1, 2019.

Motivations to engage in extreme behaviour in East Ukraine

In this last section, we will analyse how the fighters explain their motivations to participate in RS VUC's armed resistance. According to the data, the fighters claim to participate in this military effort out of duty, to defend Ukraine, and to save it from Russian violence.[205] Most frequently, the fighters emphasise the need to protect Ukraine from foreign occupants.[206] The fighters' behaviour and these motivations might indicate a need for cognitive closure, which is in accordance with the uncertainty-identity theory. One participant explains his motivation to fight by referring to the enemy that invaded Ukraine:

> The enemy has invaded our land … and to somehow prevent the advance of this enemy, we nationalists should go to war. … Our purpose is to protect the country from separatists.[207]

One fighter claims that without the contribution of volunteer fighters,[208] the separatists could spread to other regions of Ukraine: 'Without volunteers, it would have started in both Nikolaev and Odesa. So, all Ukraine would be taken away!'[209]

Participant 2 also explained her war effort by the need to protect the country: 'At the frontline we were all motivated to liberate Ukraine and to defend our lands.'[210] Similarly, participant 1 claims:

> The enemy has attacked our territory. I do not want a different flag, or to follow other laws and traditions. I want to live in Ukraine. We don't need someone else's land, but we don't want to give our own either.[211]

Similar motivations are also verbalised in an interview with RS VUC's commander in chief: 'the RS VUC will exist until all threats to the Ukrainian nation are neutralised and all Ukrainian territories are returned.'[212]

When fighters were asked what motivates them to choose RS VUC over the regular Ukrainian army, they underlined 'trust',[213] 'reciprocity',[214] 'high combat discipline and performance',[215] 'reliance on co-fighters',[216] and 'higher chances of survival'.[217]

Moreover, as indicated in the theoretical framework, the need for cognitive closure might make people more likely to view out-groups negatively. Participant 7 and 9, not only see the pro-Russian separatism as an imminent threat but dehumanise the separatists,[218] and in one case calling them a 'contagion', stressing the need 'to prevent the advance of this infection further'.[219]

Although Ukraine (that is, its political and military leaderships and most of its population) seems to disown RS VUC's fighters and their war efforts, the participants maintain that they

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[205]Participant 1, 2019; participants 3, 7, 8, and 9.
[206]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2, 3, 4, and 7.
[207]Participant 3.
[208]Participant 4.
[209]Ibid.
[210]Participant 2.
[211]Participant 1, 2019.
[212]Stempitskiy, interviewed in *Правий Сектор: Інформаційний Бюлетен.*
[213]Participant 1, 2020; and participant 2.
[214]Participant 5, Odesa, Ukraine, 4 April 2019, and participant 6.
[215]Participant 1, 2019; participants 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9.
[216]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2, 3,5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.
[217]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2, 5, 6, 7, and 9.
[218]Participant 9.
[219]Participant 7.

fight for 'the land that feeds them',[220] 'the father land',[221] their loved ones,[222] and 'future generations'.[223] Thus, the participants do not construct Ukraine in terms of its disowning majority or its distrustful governmental structures. In this way, the fighters found a different source of motivations for their war effort.

Conclusions

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this study is to advance an in-depth understanding of the RS VUC's attractiveness from the point of view of its fighters. Foremost, the study has revealed a variability and complexity of accounts relating to fighters' motivations. Participants in this study experience distrust towards the wider Ukrainian society, as well as its politicians and the military command of the regular army. From the perspective of uncertainty-identity theory, the fighters' self-uncertainty is arguably caused by contested social identities experienced in an uncertain Ukrainian environment. This experience of self-uncertainty is an effect of the ideological split that the conflict has entailed in the fighters' relationship to other citizens and even to family and friends, and it appears in encounters with the so-called 'internal enemies' in everyday life.

In this light, membership in the RS VUC, a group with unambiguous and clearly articulated group prototypes as well as high entitativity, offers an opportunity where 'genuine' Ukrainians can confirm their social identity through their membership in the group. Through a process of social categorisation, this study's participants identify themselves in accordance with the RS VUC's group prototypes. According to uncertainty-identity theory,[224] this self-categorisation and high entitativity leads to in-group favouritism, internalisation of in-group attitudes, and hostile attitudes and behaviour towards threatening others.[225]

Amid a precarious social setting characterised by an 'unreliable' government, weak state institutions, and most importantly 'internal enemies', the RS VUC stands as an ideal solution to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty. We believe this explains some of its attractiveness. Nevertheless, the study does not ascribe the reasons for joining RS VUC exclusively to the need to reduce self-uncertainty; rather, it seeks to emphasise the importance of this social psychological process in relation to other factors. Our findings also reflect the rational choice theory and demonstrate that in the face of ideological and political divisions within the society, research participants described their group membership as one that provided them with protection, helped them to conform their identities, and to gain moral and emotional benefits that they could not enjoy anywhere else. Moreover, RCT may partly explain individual motivations to join and remain in RS VUC, since participants describe RS VUC as a military unit where they could rely on their comrades during combat and deal more effectively with the combat related risks and shared danger. Hence, some participants describe their choice to join RS VUC as a rational decision where individuals weigh the costs and benefits, and they join RS VUC because it maximises their chances of survival. Moreover, our findings demonstrate that fighters also acquired 'friends for life' who served as social capital after their return to the civilian life.

Yet, most importantly, this case study has revealed that the participants interpret their decisions to join the RS VUC not only in terms of ideological beliefs and the conflict in east Ukraine but also because membership in the RS VUC offers them a unique opportunity to determine their social identity in an uncertain environment. Unlike Emmanuel Karagiannis' study on

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[220]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2, 3, 4, and 7.
[221]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2, 3, 4, and 5.
[222]Participants 8 and 9.
[223]Participant 1, 2019; participants 2, 5, and 6.
[224]Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism', p. 22.
[225]Ibid., pp. 24–5.

volunteer fighters' motivations for joining various Ukrainian battalions,[226] our study has found that ideology, political-social norms, and emotional attachment serve as appealing motivational mechanisms due to the perceived self-uncertainty in the wider Ukrainian context. We argue that social psychological factors should not be neglected, since they prove to be crucial in a society torn by conflicting beliefs and attitudes, which may lead to identity uncertainty in micro-level interactions. Hence, our study demonstrates that motivational factors such as ideology, political-social norms, and emotions can not be fully grasped in isolation from social psychological factors.

Lastly, our research has raised additional research questions demanding further clarification. Firstly, this study has challenged us to analyse the attractiveness of RS VUC by using theories dealing with rational choice, social pressure, and emotional energy. Secondly, since also other armed groups can be said to possess the same qualities as RS VUC, it could be of relevance to conduct a comparative study, where individual motivations to join other armed groups in Ukraine are explored. Thirdly, the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, starting in February 2022, and Western military and economic support to Ukraine, have raised research questions about RS VUC's and other extremist groups' possible access to heavy weaponry and its consequences in postwar Ukraine.

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[226]Karagiannis, 'Ukrainian volunteer fighters in the eastern front'.